

Breaking Free: The Adventures of Dannon Lifehold

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"Sir?"

Linkaas turned, gazing at his subordinate with thoughtful eyes. The sun of Evas VI had finally come out after three days of rain, and he wanted to enjoy its soothing warmth. Sunlamps only did so much.

"Yes, what is it?" he asked, leaning forward. "And it had better be good."

The subordinate seemed to shrink inside his clothing. "Sir, you wanted to know when Lifehold got his assignment?"

"And has he?"

"Yes, sir, just a few moments ago."

Linkaas turned back towards the window. "Excellent. He'll have to stop at Darkon III first before going to Dohu. Send Chokk and Bakk to Dohu immediately. I want them in place when Lifehold gets there."

The subordinate looked relieved. "They've already left, sir. Chokk says they'll beat Lifehold to Dohu by at least a day."

"Good," Linkaas said, drinking in the warmth. The rain had been good for his fronds, but without the sunlight he would freeze. "That should give them plenty of time to be in place to kill Lifehold." He spun suddenly, startling the subordinate. "Was there anything else?"

"N-no, sir," the subordinate mumbled.

"Very well, then. I think that I shall take my sun on the terrace. Wheel me out, Qwot."

"Yes, sir."

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The pinging of the proximity alarm woke Dannen from a reasonably sound sleep. With a yawn and a stretch, he hopped down from his berth and headed for the bridge of the *Lifeline*. Out of habit, he cocked his ears, listening for any change in pitch that would indicate engine problems. Satisfied that his ship would make it back to Evas, he paused at an empty cabin. He almost knocked before he caught himself. Feq had been dead for a couple of months now, but Dannen still found himself listening for Feq's jovial voice, his friendly chuckle, and his curses as he'd tried to keep the engines running.

Face it, Lifehold, Dannen told himself, he's gone. At least you won't have to listen to his snoring.

Turning, Dannen walked to the bridge and sat down just as the hyperdrive shut off and the main engine kicked in. Checking his readouts, he confirmed that he was indeed just outside the Dohu system, about 20,000 kilometers from the outermost planet's orbit. He hated coming out this far from the system, but without a backup pilot, he didn't have much choice. He had to sleep sometime, after all. But, with eight planets in the system and his destination the seventh, he only had a short flight to deal with.

He glanced over at the empty copilot's chair. Well, at least this was the last job he owed on his debt. One more pickup/delivery, one more payment to Linkaas, and the *Lifeline* would be his at last -- lock, stock, and sensor dish. Then he could afford to hire a first mate, and go for the profits.

Two hours later, as he guided his ship towards the largest land mass on Dohu VII, his ship comm began blaring insistently. "Unidentified ship, this is Dohu Space Control, respond immediately. Unidentified ship, this is Dohu Space Con--"

Dannen hit the response button, cutting the voice off in mid-syllable. "Dohu Space Control, go ahead."

"Unidentified ship, please broadcast your identity beacon, and state your purpose."

"Transmitting code now, Space Control," Dannen said, flicking a switch.

A moment later, the comm crackled to life again. "Space Control to starship *Black Knight*, state your purpose."

"Equipment delivery to warehouse of Linkaas Corporation in city of Skagras," he replied. A small lie; actually, it was a pickup.

"Starship *Black Knight*, you are cleared to land at Docking Bay 71 in the city of Skagras. Directions are being transmitted to your guidance computer."

"Space Control, this is the *Black Knight*, cleared for Docking Bay 71," Dannen said. "Directions received. Thanks for the assistance. *Black Knight* out."

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Skagras was a fairly good-sized city, but Docking Bay 71 was little more than a pit in the ground with a few support buildings nearby. As Dannen hovered over the pit, the ship lurched to starboard, and a red light began flashing. With a curse, Dannen struggled to keep the ship level as the landing gear lowered. He heard a *thunk* as the gear locked into place.

Here we go, all or nothing, he thought. *Just hope it isn't too serious.*

Slowly he eased the ship to the ground, fighting the loss of power all the way. The starboard landing gear hit the ground, and Dannen reduced power to the port side repulsorlift. The port gear touched down with a thud, and all the legs creaked as they bore the full weight of the ship. With a sigh of relief, Dannen shut down the engines and headed for the engine room.

Checking only told him what he had expected -- the starboard repulsorlift had blown out. It was still barely operational, but it meant he had two choices: fix it today with money he didn't have yet or lift off with 40 percent less power. Looked like the second option was all he had.

"Great," Dannen said to himself. "That's all I need today."

Heading out of the ship, he stopped just long enough to grab a datapad with his directions to the warehouse. Consulting it, he saw that it was about four kilometers away, in the heart of the city. Taking the first street he came to, he noticed a cantina on the corner.

A grin crossed his face. He had enough time for a little refreshment.

Dannen's nose wrinkled as he entered the cantina. An aroma of smoke, sweat, and incense fumes assaulted his nasal passages. Walking to the bar, he noticed a few patrons in one of the booths gazing his way. They scrutinized him intently as he placed his order with the bartender. After a short conversation, one of them approached him.

It was a Silika, his craggy face looking weather-beaten and worn. Like all of its race, it had a slit of a mouth across its face; but this one also had a curious look in its eyes.

It tapped Dannen's shoulder with the leftmost of its three arms. "You are Dannen Lifehold?"

Dannen looked at the questioner. "Who wants to know?"

The alien looked confused. "I do. Is there anyone else with me?"

Dannen sighed. "Never mind. What do you want?"

"I want to meet the being who beat Kemmel Attapi at his own game. He was rumored to have hair your shade."

Dannen ran a hand through his thick shock of blue. Then he remembered. "Oh, yes, now I remember. The Silika with a hollow body."

"Yes," the alien confirmed. "I am Kenta Anwa. Until you beat him, I lasted the longest against him." His eyes glittered. "Now, I challenge you to the Contest."



"Look, I really don't want to do this, friend. I've had a bad day and it promises to be worse. And I really don't think you want me to take your money."

"Honor demands that I challenge you, Lifehold-sir. And you know of our honor, don't you?"

Dannen did. The Contest demanded that the loser accept defeat and not take revenge on the winner. Credits were usually exchanged by the witnesses, but bets between the contestants were not unknown. He sighed inwardly. "All right, all right, your challenge is accepted."

The Silika smiled gratingly. "Come join us, and I will get our fluids." He signalled the bartender. "Silika waters, if you please." As the bartender complied, Dannen joined the other Silika at the table. The others faced him and performed an intricate series of gestures with all three hands as he sat down. Dannen repeated the gestures as best as he could.

"Greetings, Lifehold-sir, defeater of Kemmel Attapi," they chorused. "We welcome you, and wish you strength."

Dannen sighed. He hated standing on ceremony, but it had to be done. Challenge had been offered and properly accepted, so he had to go through with it. Besides, if he backed out now, they would shoot him.

"I thank you for your greetings, and return them in full," he responded.

At the reply, the three relaxed visibly and stretched out their middle hands to him for shaking. Dannen clasped each one, then surreptitiously wiped the gravel and dust from his hands. When his challenger returned with several frosted glasses, Dannen repeated the gestures and the words.

The challenger tossed a thousand-credit chip onto the table -- his wager. Dannen blinked at the chip; if he had known, he would have been a little more adamant. He really didn't want to do this, but it was too late now.

Well, at least he could get his ship fixed.

"Are you ready, Lifehold-sir?"

"Yes," Dannen answered, eager to get it over with.

"Then begin, and I will follow."

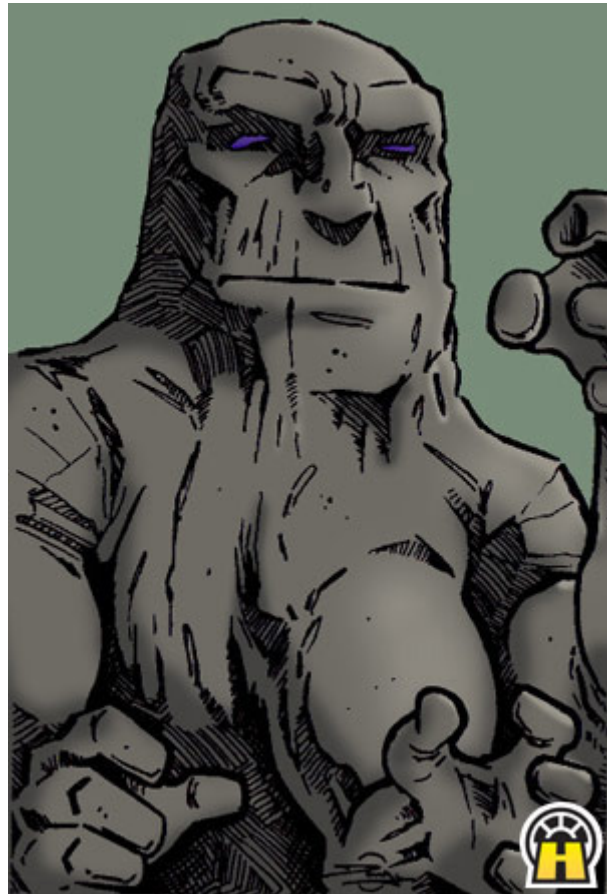
Dannen took an experimental sip and tasted it thoroughly. No odd aftertaste, no trace of anything unusual, no unnatural smell ... probably safe. Throat working, he drained the glass in one long gulp and set the glass down. The challenger gaped, then looked at his glass. Slowly, he raised it, and, as the Contest rules stated, drank his the same way.

Five mugs later, the challenger wobbled for a moment, mumbled something, then fell onto the floor with a loud crash. The three remaining Silika gazed at Dannen with awe as he picked up the chip.

"You are truly a champion, Lifehold-sir," the middle one said. "No wonder you beat Attapi."

Dannen bowed. "My congratulations to your friend. He is a brave being, if a little rash." With a small salute, he turned and left.

As he hit the fresh air and the path towards the warehouse, Dannen thought about this reputation he was getting. If he hadn't gotten into the contest with Attapi, someone else would have, of course. Almost any being would have done the job -- he just happened to be the one selected. There just weren't too many creatures who were affected by mineral water, and with their silicon-based physiology, Silika were influenced by it that much more quickly. Why they had to challenge a human in the first place made no sense, but maybe it was just bad luck. It was like challenging a Wookiee to a tree-climbing contest.



A couple of kilometers later, Dannen arrived at the warehouse. He had gotten used to the bizarre way Linkaas handled things; warehouses without workers were the norm. Dohu was just a stopping point for the cargo, and Dannen was just the next one to transport it.

"Boy, I'm glad this is the last one," he muttered to himself. "I hate the way that plant does business."

Keying his entry code into the lock, he stepped inside, making his way to the storage area. Rounding a corner, he found the cargo: 12 crates, each about six cubic meters in size. A rack of cargo movers stood against the wall. Knowing Linkaas, they would be charged and ready.

Dannen headed towards the movers. As he rounded the corner, something tickled the back of his neck. Instinctively he rolled forward, just in time to avoid the blaster shot that scorched the floor where he'd been standing. Dannen ducked behind the crates and drew his own blaster from its holster. Quickly he fired off two shots, then ducked behind cover.

Great, this is all I need.

Suddenly, something lashed out from behind and wrapped itself tightly around his body, pinning his arms. Seconds later, there was a small sting at his throat, and he was raised off the ground and gagged with a similar-feeling cord. He found himself looking at two red-skinned, muscular bodies. Something familiar about them...

He was still thinking about it when the darkness took him.

* * *

When he came to, he was suspended in midair. By twisting his body slightly, he found that he was hanging from a rafter in the roof. More cords had bound his wrists, and the rope on his body was tied to the beam above him. He had been blindfolded, but he could hear the thieves below as they moved the crates out of the warehouse and into some kind of vehicle. Slowly, so as not to arouse attention, he twisted his wrists to try to loosen his bonds. No use -- it was almost like his hands were dipped in plasteel.

The sense of déjà vu returned, stronger this time. Plasteel... something about bonds that felt like plasteel...

His musings were cut short when he heard a voice below him. "What do we do with him?"

"You remember what the boss said," a second voice replied. "We kill him, and leave him here."

I've heard those voices before, but where? he thought.

"What about his ship?" First Voice said.

"We leave it for now, and get it later."

"Okay," First Voice said.

Dannen heard the rustle of a blaster being drawn, and braced himself. *I'm on my way, Feq. Sooner than I thought, but I'm coming.*

When the shot came, there was a scream from below, and several war whoops from the direction of the door. Next came a lot of shooting, and a lot of shouting.

"Let's get out of here!" Second Voice said. "There's too many of them!"

Dannen heard the sound of the cargo carrier drive away. Then, a few moments later, he felt hands lowering him gently to the floor. A vibro-shiv cut his bonds, and his blindfold was removed. Blinking at bright light, Dannen beheld...

"Kenta Anwa?"

The Silika shook his head. "No, Lifehold-sir, I am Klin, brother and companion to Kenta. Are you injured?"

Dannen stood, wincing at the pain in his muscles. "Sore, but I'll live." He looked from one Silika to the other. "How did you find me?"

"My brother's ego got the best of him," Klin said. "He wanted to prove that he had met and competed against you, but forgot to bring his holo-camera. When he woke up, he demanded that I get his camera and find you. We tracked your scent here, and came upon the bandits." His rocky face looked forlorn. "We could not stop them from getting away."

"But you did stop them from killing me," Dannen said as he stretched. "Thank you. I owe you one."

Klin shook his head, "You owe us nothing, Lifehold-sir. We are glad to assist. But, we would ask one favor."

"Name it."

Klin reached into his pack and pulled out a holo-camera.

* * *

Dannen headed towards the docking bay. He'd been walking and thinking for the last hour, trying to figure out what to do. His cargo had been stolen, he wasn't going to be able to make his last ship payment, and his starboard repulsorlift was almost shot. And, to top it all off, those bandits had even taken his winnings from the Contest.

As he entered his bay, his despair grew. So, what to do?

Go tell Linkaas the truth? Sure, as if he'd believe it. And Linkaas wouldn't consider the testimony of the Silika.

Run? Yeah, but to where? And he'd spend the rest of his life with Linkaas' stooges after him. Definitely not the way to a long life.

Dannen stopped cold in the middle of the bay. *Stooges... wait a minute...*

"That's it!" he shouted. "That lousy, rotten, son-of-a..."

His shout startled something under his ship. In an instant, his blaster was in his hand and pointing at the intruder.

"Come on out!" he called. "I'm not in the mood for games!"

The interloper slowly came out from under the ship. She stood about one and a half meters high, with light brown fur and blue eyes. Her face and body were very catlike in nature, right down to the whiskers. She wore a threadbare shirt and torn pants. A tool belt hung from her waist. Barefoot, her tail twitched, although Dannen couldn't tell if it was from fear, anger, or apprehension.

Dannen approached her slowly. "What were you doing under there?"

She gazed at him with wide eyes. "Ship broken. I make better."

"You're a mechanic?"

"Mechanic?" she asked, her tongue stumbling over what was obviously an unfamiliar word.

Dannen tried again. "You fix things?"

Her eyes lit up. "Yes! I fix your ship!"

Dannen lowered his blaster. "Who told you my ship needed repairs?"

"I saw ship land. Knew it was broken. Came to fix."

"Wait a minute, you just walked in here and started working?"

"No, jumped wall," she said, pointing at the wall. "Ship is yours?"

"Yes, it is."

She smiled, revealing incisors like needles. "Very pretty."

The Lifeline? Pretty? That's a new one.
Dannen returned the smile. "What's your name?"

She said something too fast and too complicated for him to follow. "Person I once travel with called me Purr. I liked that."



"All right, Purr it is. Would you show me what you fixed?"

She led him underneath the ship to the starboard repulsorlift. Removing a panel, she moved aside so he could look. Dannen looked, and gasped: parts and wires he'd never seen before were hooked together in a mess that looked like undercooked Dacho noodles.

"Oh, no! What have you done?" he moaned in despair.

"Fixed it," Purr said.

"You've got to be kidding. It'll never work like this!"

"Yes, it work now. Try it!"

Her confidence was real, but the way it looked... "Are you sure?"

"It work now. Promise!"

Dannen took another look, then sighed. "Okay, but if this ship crashes and I get killed, I'll never speak to you again."

"No!" Purr shouted, wrapping her arms around him. "No! Don't crash! Don't crash!"

"Easy, Purr," Dannen said, surprised. "It was just a joke."

Purr buried her face into his chest. "Never joke about death. Never!"

"Okay, okay, I'm sorry. I'll never do it again, promise."

She looked up at him. "Promise?"

"I promise. Now, let me go, and I'll try your repair."

She looked up at his face. "Repair?"

"Never mind."

Purr released him, and together they headed to the bridge. Dannen sat down, and Purr slipped into the copilot's chair. After receiving clearance to take off, Dannen slowly fed power to the repulsorlifts, checking the warning light every few seconds.

The *Lifeline* slowly raised off the ground. The starboard repulsorlift was carrying its share of the load with no sign of power loss. Dannen went to full power, and the *Lifeline* rose majestically toward the sky.

"I don't believe it," he said in awe.

"Told you it was fixed," Purr said with a smile.

"You sure did. I'll be a bantha, it works." Then he remembered "Purr, I can't pay you. See, I was robbed, and..."

Purr raised a paw and silenced him. "Don't want money. But... something to eat? And a warm place to sleep?"

Dannen smiled, and led her to the kitchen. She operated the autochef with practiced ease, he noticed. After leading her to a spare room, he put the ship into hyperspace, then went to his own room.

He had a lot of thinking to do.

* * *

At about three planetary diameters away from Evas, Dannen put a call through to Linkaas on the subspace comm. Linkaas came on immediately.

"Dannen, my boy, it's good to hear from you," he said, surprise evident in his voice.

"Spare me, Linkaas," Dannen interrupted. "You weren't planning on seeing me ever again, and you know it."

"Whatever do you mean, my boy?"

"You had your boys Chokk and Bakk waiting for me at Skagras, Linkaas. They ambushed me and almost killed me. I saw them."

Linkaas did his best to sound hurt. He didn't do well. "Even if they were there, how can you say I sent them to kill you? You're one of my best couriers."

Dannen smiled grimly into the vid pickup. "Because they were stupid enough to use rope guns, that's why. They're still in development. I tested them myself, and I know what the cord feels like. That's how I know, you sap-blooded Pliith weed. You tried to have me killed, and make it look like a robbery."

For a moment, Linkaas' fronds turned purple with rage. "Those incompetent, bungling... why, Dannen, I don't know what you're talking about. Those rope guns must have been stolen."

"No dice, Linkas. I figured it all out, you see. I think you wanted to steal the *Lifeline*. I'd almost paid it off, meaning I wouldn't have to work for you anymore. So you have me killed, then sell the ship to some other poor fool." Dannen smiled grimly. "Plus, you'd have the shipment to sell, without paying for its transport. Cute scheme. You get an A for effort. But it wasn't good enough."

Linkaas answered Dannen's smile with one of his own. "You can't prove any of it, you know. It would just be the word of a smuggler against the word of a corporation president. You wouldn't stand a chance."

Dannen's grin tightened. "Try me."

"I just might. Anyway, you still owe me for your last payment, plus the cost of the shipment you lost..."

"You *stole* it!" Dannen thundered.

"Prove it. As I was saying, you now owe me 25,334 credits, payable on demand. And I demand it now."

Dannen sat back, stunned. "I hope someone poisons your fertilizer."

Just at that moment, Purr peered into the comm screen. "He's a plant!" she exclaimed in amazement.

"Purr, get back!" Dannen said, pushing her away.

"Why, Dannen, who's your friend?" Linkaas asked, his anger momentarily forgotten.

"Ah, nobody," Dannen said.

"Nonsense, my boy; let me see her."

Purr leaned into the pickup again. Linkaas examined her image closely, then chuckled. "Do you know what you have there, my boy? That's a Tinnell."

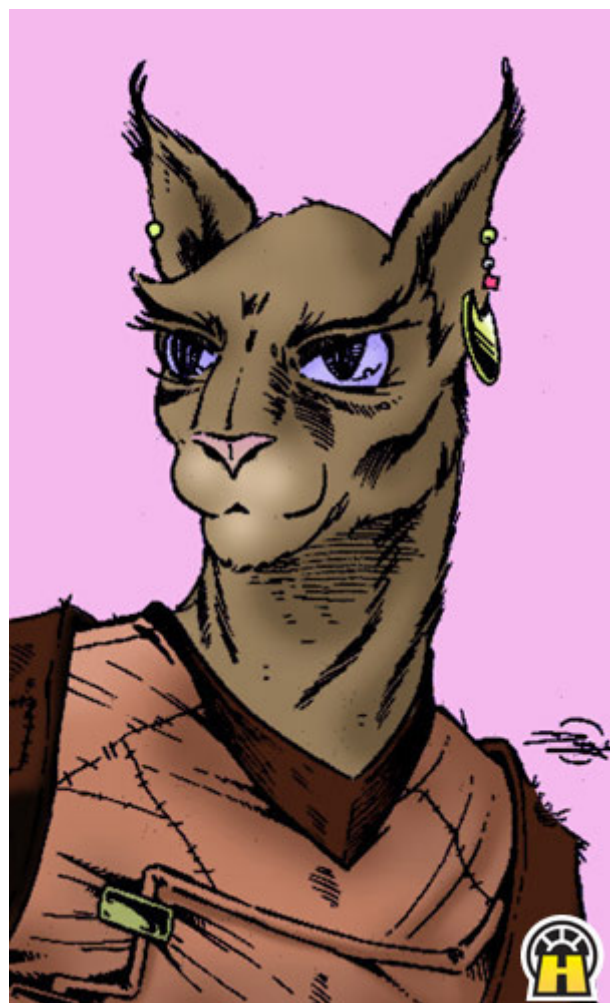
Dannen frowned. "A what?"

"A Tinnell. They are excruciatingly stupid in everything but technology; the best mechanics in the galaxy. Tinnell seem to have an inborn knack for fixing things. They are also extremely rare. Where did you find her?"

"None of your business."

Linkaas looked thoughtfully at the pair. "You know, Dannen, this puts a new light on things. I'll tell you what I'll do; you bring that Tinnell to us for study, and I'll forgive your debt. You'll own the ship, free and clear, and you won't have to pay for the shipment."

"Forget it, Linkaas," Dannen snarled. "I know what you mean by 'study.' You want to dissect her!"



"Of course not. I must find out if her technical genius can be duplicated. She'll work for me by day, and I'll... study her by night."

"Nothing doing. I'm not going to let you enslave a living being. And I'm not paying for that shipment, or the last payment on the ship."

"I'm sorry you feel that way, my boy," Linkaas said. "But you have no choice. I will have my money, or the Tinnell. And you will give them to me now."

"Dannen?" Purr said, tapping his shoulder.

Dannen ignored her. "Dream on, Linkaas. You've been taking your own spices."

"Dannen?" Purr said again.

"What?" he snapped, annoyed.

"What are those?" she said, pointing out the window. He followed her paw, and saw four small fighters coming towards them from the planet.

"Oh, no," Dannen moaned. "I should've known. We're outta here, Purr. Hold on!"

"Known what?"

"He kept me busy on the comm line just long enough to send some friends."

Purr looked at the ships. "You mean those are friends of yours? Maybe they'll help us."

"Not *our* friends, Purr, *his* friends. He hoped I wouldn't notice." With a practiced flip of a switch, he brought the shields up, the engines on-line and full power. The *Lifeline* shot forward like a scalded cat, dodging the fighters' blaster fire, and swerved away from the planet.

Dannen smiled out the window, at the fighters swooping towards him. "Okay, suckers, let's dance."

"Dance?"

"Never mind." He reached up and activated the nav computer, and performed a tight bank that shook the lead fighter off his tail for a moment. "Now, where can we go for a while?"

Purr thought. "Don't know."

"That's all right, I don't know either." He began jinking the ship to make a harder target, shaking them in random directions. Then, with a grin, he punched some buttons and fed information into the nav computer.

"Where we go?" Purr asked.

"Alderaan," he replied. "Ever been there?"

Purr thought. It was an effort. "Don't think so."

"I know some people there. They're pretty friendly people, very peaceful." At that moment, a stray shot hit the shields, making Dannen grimace. "And a little peace is something we can use. Don't worry, you'll like it."

"Promise?"

Dannen grinned. "Promise."

A green light began flashing on the panel. Purr reached across the board and pointed at the light. "What's that flashing?"

"It means we're leaving," he answered, pulling back on the levers.

The *Lifeline* shot into hyperspace, just as the fighters activated their blasters. The lead fighter pilot flicked his comm switch. "LC-1 to base," he said.

"Go ahead, LC-1."

"They got away, sir."

"Yes, I know," the voice of Linkaas rumbled from the speaker. "You weren't fast enough. But no matter, I'll have Lifehold, his Tinnell, and his ship soon enough." Linkaas paused. "Oh, and Captain? You're all fired."

There were four brief flares as the ships self-destructed. Soon there was no evidence that they had ever existed.

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As the stars became elongated lines and the ship's hyperdrive took over, Dannen relaxed. "Okay, we're safe now."

Purr looked at him. "Why did that plant want me?"

Dannen considered. If he told her the truth, she'd probably get confused. Best to keep it simple. "He wants to kill you."

Her eyes opened wide in terror. "Why?"

"Because you're special. And because he knows it would hurt me."

Purr gazed at him. "You won't let him take me, will you?"

Dannen smiled, and gathered her up in his arms. "No, Purr, I won't let him take you. I promise." He scratched her head; during the trip from Dohu, he discovered she liked it. "Come on, let's get some rest. We have a long trip ahead."